

# Free pizza and a passion for wildlife

by Betty Siegel



Friday night, Sept. 11 at 6pm a passionate group of people will be meeting at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, and you are invited to eat pizza and find out what they are so excited about. They are the Friends of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, and they are passionate about wilderness and wildlife, about educating the public about Alaska's 16 National Wildlife Refuges, and helping the refuges accomplish their missions.

They are also passionate about volunteering. Betty Siegel, a retired social worker, never expected to find herself on hands and knees in the dust of the Dalton Highway pulling invasive weeds until she got involved with the Friends. She never dreamed she'd be teaching young children in tiny communities on the refuges how to use binoculars and identify birds.

Marvin and Sharon Baur never thought they would end up selling their home in Arizona and mov-

ing to Alaska where Friends brought them opportunities to travel all over the state helping refuges with projects ranging from festivals to rat prevention to running the remote refuge station at Adak.

Brenda Dolma, a retired teacher, found new ways to share her education and art skills and knowledge with children in a fishing weir/science camp.

Vera Stein, an art therapy teacher and flight attendant for Pen Air, found new opportunities to teach art in bush villages.

Bree Murphy, a graduate student, found her Master's thesis subject (educational learning occurring at the convergence of traditional knowledge and western science) as a result of volunteering at a science and culture camp near McGrath.

Friends of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuges are indeed a passionate group of people. Friends' volunteers are educators and advocates for the refuges. They help the refuges with wildlife management and habitat improvement projects. They help fund refuge-oriented projects through grants, memberships, donations, and other activities. There are many underfunded and understaffed projects and needs of the refuges, and these dedicated volunteers strive to assist whenever and wherever they can. Some ways they have served include:

- Helping in science and culture camps,
- Leading bird walks in native communities,
- Working to control non-native, invasive species that threaten the refuges,
- Testifying before congressional committees in Washington, D.C.
- Writing advocacy letters and material for newsletters and articles,
- Bringing environmental issues to cities and communities through lectures and plays and photo exhibits
- Teaching photography and art to native children
- Rowing a raft transporting kids to fishing weir/science camp

- Helping the elders prepare meals in remote camps
- Serving on the Friends board and committees
- Organizing Refuge Centennial celebrations in five locations
- Preparing and packing Rat Prevention Kits for distribution to boaters

While the refuges obtain many benefits from the work of the volunteers, the Friends also gain knowledge and new skills and rewarding experiences. They learn about the Alaska Refuges from refuge staff and from first hand observations; they learn about native culture, bush life and a subsistence lifestyle; they interact with elders and children of all ages in settings which defy description; they increase their ability to be flexible and adaptable when nature changes the schedule and leaves them stranded on a river bank or when supplies and people are unable to arrive when expected; they learn about Invasive plants and their potential impact on refuges, and find they are willing to deal with dust, dirt, bugs, and sore muscles to prevent their spread. Volunteers also receive gratitude and appreciation from refuge staff and the knowledge they are benefiting present and future generations.

Not everyone is able to go to a remote camp or lead a bird walk or organize an event, but members have found many ways to contribute their unique skills.

They may have grant-writing abilities, can do data entry, write a newsletter article, or assist in other ways. Many members are employed full time with families and can contribute only occasionally; some live out of state and help out via computer and teleconferencing. As the membership grows and the refuges find additional ways to use the Friends, additional opportunities will arise.

The Friends' Annual Meeting is taking place at Kenai NWR Saturday, Sept. 12. The public is invited to a Pizza Party on Friday night at 6pm. This is an opportunity for everyone to see who they are and what they are all about. Come on over and enjoy free pizza and hear about their experiences.

*Betty Siegel is the Volunteer Coordinator for the Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, which is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting conservation of the natural resources of all the Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, promoting understanding and appreciation of these refuges, and assisting the USFWS meet its mandates. For more information see [www.alaskarefugefriends.org](http://www.alaskarefugefriends.org) or contact Betty Siegel, Volunteer Coordinator (907) 235-1598 or Sharon Baur, Vice-President (907) 226-2135. You can check on new bird sightings or report your bird sighting on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Birding Hotline (907) 262-2300. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*